

THE HELICON SERIES. IX.

MARPESSA



"ROAMING WITH MORNING THOUGHTS AMID THE DEW."

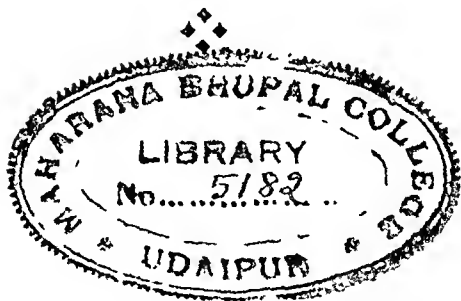
MARPESSA

BY

STEPHEN PHILLIPS

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY

PHILIP CONNARD



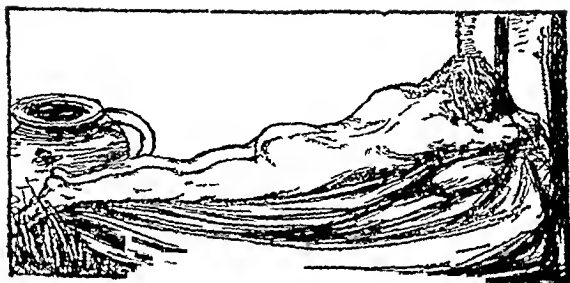
LONDON

JOHN LANE THE BODLEY HEAD LTD.

This Edition first published 1928

Printed in Great Britain
by R. & R. Clark, Limited, Edinburgh

MARPESSA



MARPESSA

Marpessa, being given by Zeus her choice between the god Apollo and Idas a mortal, chose Idas.

WOUNDED with beauty in the summer
night

Young Idas tossed upon his couch, and
cried

“ Marpessa, O Marpessa ! ” From the
dark

The floating smell of flowers invisible,
The mystic yearning of the garden wet,
The moonless-passing night—into his
brain

M A R P E S S A

Wandered, until he rose and outward
 leaned

In the dim summer : 'twas the moment
 deep

When we are conscious of the secret
 dawn,

Amid the darkness that we feel is green.

To Idas had Marpessa been revealed,

Roaming with morning thoughts amid
 the dew,

All fresh from sleeping ; and upon her
 cheek

The bloom of pure repose ; like perfect
fruit

Even at the moment was her beauty ripe.
The god Apollo from the heaven of
heavens

Her mortal sweetness through the air
allured ;

And on this very noon she shall decide
'Twixt Idas and the god, take to herself
A brief or an eternal lover. So

When the long day that glideth without
cloud,

M A R P E S S A

The summer day, was at her blue deep
hour
Of lilies musical with busy bliss,
When every light trembled as with
excess,
And heat was frail, and every bush and
flower
Was drooping in the glory overcome ;
They three together met ; on the one
side,
Fresh from diffusing light on all the
world,

Apollo ; on the other without sleep
Idas, and in the midst Marpessa
stood.

Just as a flower after drenching rain,
So from the falling felicity
Her human beauty glowed, and it was
new ;

The bee too near her bosom drowsed
and dropped.

But as the god sprang to embrace her, .
they

Heard thunder, and a little afterward

M A R P E S S A

The far Paternal voice, "Let her decide".

And as a flame blown backward by a gust,

Burned to and fro in fury beautiful

The murmuring god ; but at the last he spoke,

And smiled as on his favourite western isle.

"Marpessa, though no trouble, nor any pain,

So is it willed, can touch me ; but I live

For ever in a deep deliberate bliss,
A spirit sliding through tranquillity ;
Yet when I saw thee I imagined
 woe,
That thou who art so fair, shouldst ever
 taste
Of the earth-sorrow : for thy life has
 been
The history of a flower in the air,
Liable but to breezes and to time,
As rich and purposeless as is the rose :
Thy simple doom is to be beautiful.

Thee God created but to grow, not
 strive,
 And not to suffer, merely to be sweet, and
 The favourite of his rains ; and thou
 indeed
 Lately upon the summer west disclosed.
 Child, wilt thou taste of grief? On
 thee the hours
 Shall feed, and bring thy soul into the
 dusk :
 Even now thy face is hasting to the
 dark !

M A R P E S S A

For slowly shalt thou cool to all things
great,
And wisely smile at love ; and thou
shalt see
Beautiful Faith surrendering to Time,
The fierce ingratitude of children
loved,
Ah, sting of stings ! A mourner shalt
thou stand
At Passion's funeral in decent garb.
The greenly silent and cool-growing
night

Shall be the time when most thou art
awake,
With dreary eyes of all illusion cured,
Beside that stranger that thy husband is.
But if thou'lt live with me, then shalt
thou bide
In mere felicity above the world,
In peace alive and moving, where to
stir
Is ecstasy, and thrilling is repose.
What is the love of men that women
seek it?



“THE FIERCE INGRATITUDE OF CHILDREN LOVED.”

In its beginning pale with cruelty,
But having sipped of beauty, negligent,
And full of languor and distaste : for
they
Seeking that perfect face beyond the
world
Approach in vision earthly semblances,
And touch, and at the shadows flee
away.
Then wilt thou die ? Part with eternal
thoughts,
Lie without any hope beneath the grass,

All thy imaginations in the dust ?
And all that tint and melody and breath,
Which in their lovely unison are thou,
To be dispersed upon the whirling sands!
Thy soul blown seaward on nocturnal
blast !

O brief and breathing creature, wilt thou
cease

Once having been ? Thy doom doth
make thee rich,
And the low grave doth make thee ex-
quisite.

But if thou'lt live with me, then I will
kiss

Warm immortality into thy lips ; }
And I will carry thee above the world,
To share my ecstasy of flinging beams,
And scattering without intermission joy.
And thou shalt know that first leap of
the sea

Toward me ; the grateful upward look
of earth,

Emerging roseate from her bath of
dew,—

M A R P E S S A

We two in heaven dancing,—Babylon
Shall flash and murmur, and cry from
under us,
And Nineveh catch fire, and at our
feet
Be hurled with her inhabitants, and all
Adoring Asia kindle and hugely
bloom ;—
We two in heaven running,—continents
Shall lighten, ocean unto ocean flash,
And rapidly laugh till all this world is
warm.

Or since thou art a woman, thou shalt
have

More tender tasks ; to steal upon the
sea,

A long expected bliss to tossing men.

Or build upon the evening sky some
wished

And glorious metropolis of cloud.

Thou shalt persuade the harvest and
bring on

The deeper green ; or silently attend

The fiery funeral of foliage old,

Connive with Time serene and the good
hours.

Or,—for I know thy heart,—a dearer
toil,—

To lure into the air a face long sick,
To gild the brow that from its dead
looks up,

To shine on the unforgiven of this world;
With slow sweet surgery restore the
brain,

And to dispel shadows and shadowy
fear.”



“MORE TENDER TASKS; TO STEAL UPON THE SEA.”

When he had spoken, humbly Idas said :
 "After such argument what can I plead?
 Or what pale promise make ? Yet since
 it is

In women to pity rather than to aspire, {
 A little I will speak. I love thee then
 Not only for thy body packed with sweet
 Of all this world, that cup of brimming
 June,
 That jar of violet wine set in the air,
 That palest rose sweet in the night of
 life ;

Nor for that stirring bosom all besieged
 By drowsing lovers, or thy perilous
 hair ;

Nor for that face that might indeed
 provoke

Invasion of old cities ; } no, nor all
 Thy freshness stealing on me like strange
 sleep.

Not for this only do I love thee, but
 Because Infinity upon thee broods ;
 And thou art full of whispers and of
 shadows.

Thou meanest what the sea has striven
to say

So long, and yearned up the cliffs to tell ;
Thou art what all the winds have uttered
not,

What the still night suggesteth to the
heart.

Thy voice is like to music heard ere
birth,

Some spirit lute touched on a spirit sea ;
Thy face remembered is from other
worlds,

It has been died for, though I know not
when,

It has been sung of, though I know not
where.

It has the strangeness of the luring West,
And of sad sea-horizons ; beside thee
I am aware of other times and lands,
Of birth far-back, of lives in many
stars.

O beauty lone and like a candle clear
In this dark country of the world !
Thou art

My woe, my early light, my music
dying.”

As he was speaking, she with lips
apart

Breathed, and with dimmer eyes leaned
through the air

As one in dream, and now his human
hand

Took in her own ; and to Apollo spoke :

“ O gradual rose of the dim universe !

Whose warmth steals through the grave
unto the dead,

Soul of the early sky, the priest of bloom !
Who beautifully goest in the West,
Attracting as to an eternal home
The yearning soul. Male of the female
earth !
O eager bridegroom springing in this
world
As in thy bed prepared ! Fain would
I know
Yon heavenly wafting through the
heaven wide,
And the large view of the subjected seas,

And famous cities, and the various toil
Of men : all Asia at my feet spread out
In indolent magnificence of bloom !
Africa in her matted hair obscured,
And India in meditation plunged !
Then the delight of flinging the sun-
beams,
Diffusing silent bliss ; and yet more
sweet,—
To cherish fruit on the warm wall ; to
raise
Out of the tomb to glory the pale wheat,

Serene ascension by the rain prepared ;
 To work with the benignly falling hours,
 And beautiful slow Time. But dearest
 this

To gild the face that from its dead looks
 up,

To shine on the rejected, and arrive
 To women that remember in the night ;
 Or mend with sweetest surgery the
 mind.

And yet, forgive me if I can but speak
 Most human words. Of immortality

Thou singest : thou wouldst hold me
from the ground,

And this just opening beauty from the
grave.

As yet I have known no sorrow ; all my
days

Like perfect lilies under water stir,
And God has sheltered me from his own
wind ;

The darling of his breezes have I been.
Yet as to one inland, that dreameth lone,
Sea-faring men with their sea-weary eyes,

Round the inn-fire tell of some foreign
land ;

So agéd men, much tossed about in life,
Have told me of that country, Sorrow
far.

How many goodly ships at anchor lie
Within her ports ; even to me indeed
Hath a sea-rumour through the night
been borne.

And I myself remember, and have heard,
Of men that did believe, women that
loved,

That were unhappy long and now are
dead,
With wounds that no eternity can close,
Life had so marked them : or of others
who
Panted toward their end, and fell on
death
Even as sobbing runners breast the
tape.
And most I remember of all human
things
My mother ; often as a child I pressed

Only a dreadful pacing to and fro
Of spirits meditating on the sun ;
A land of baréd boughs and grieving
 wind ;
Yet would I not forego the doom, the
 place,
Whither my poets and my heroes went
Before me ; warriors that with deeds
 forlorn
Saddened my youth, yet made it great
 to live ;
Lonely antagonists of Destiny,

That went down scornful before many
spears,
Who soon as we are born, are straight
our friends ;
And live in simple music, country songs,
And mournful ballads by the winter fire.
Since they have died ; their death is
ever mine ;
I would not lose it. Then, thou speak'st
of joy,
Of immortality without one sigh,
Existence without tears for evermore.

Thou wouldst preserve me from the
anguish, lest
This holy face into the dark return.
Yet I being human, human sorrow miss.
The half of music, I have heard men
say,
Is to have grieved ; when comes the
lonely wail
Over the mind ; old men have told it me
Subdued after long life by simple sounds.
The mourner is the favourite of the
moon,

And the departing sun his glory owes
To the eternal thoughts of creatures
brief,

Who think the thing that they shall never
see.

Since we must die, how bright the starry
track !

How wonderful in a bereavéd ear
The Northern wind ; how strange the
summer night,

The exhaling earth to those who vainly
love.

Out of our sadness have we made this
world

So beautiful ; the sea sighs in our brain,
And in our heart that yearning of the
moon.

To all this sorrow was I born, and since
Out of a human womb I came, I am
Not eager to forego it ; I would scorn
To elude the heaviness and take the
joy,

For pain came with the sap, pangs with
the bloom :

This is the sting, the wonder. Yet
should I

Linger beside thee in felicity,
Sliding with open eyes through liquid
bliss

For ever ; still I must grow old. Ah, I
Should ail beside thee, Apollo, and
should note

With eyes that would not be, but yet
are dim,

Ever so slight a change from day to
day

In thee my husband ; watch thee nudge
thyself

To little offices that once were sweet :
Slow where thou once wert swift, re-
membering

To kiss those lips which once thou
couldst not leave.

I should expect thee by the Western
bay,

Faded, not sure of thee, with desperate
smiles,

And pitiful devices of my dress

Or fashion of my hair : thou wouldst
grow kind ;

Most bitter to a woman that was
loved.

I must ensnare thee to my arms, and
touch

Thy pity, to but hold thee to my
heart.

But if I live with Idas, then we two
On the low earth shall prosper hand in
hand

In odours of the open field, and live

In peaceful noises of the farm, and
watch

The pastoral fields burned by the setting
sun.

And he shall give me passionate chil-
dren, not

Some radiant god that will despise me
quite,

But clambering limbs and little hearts
that err.

And I shall sleep beside him in the
night,



“AND HE SHALL GIVE ME PASSIONATE CHILDREN.”

And fearful from some dream shall touch
his hand

Secure ; or at some festival we two

Will wander through the lighted city
streets ;

And in the crowd I'll take his arm and
feel

Him closer for the press. So shall we live.

And though the first sweet sting of love
be past,

The sweet that almost venom is ; though
youth,

With tender and extravagant delight,
The first and secret kiss by twilight
 hedge,
The insane farewell repeated o'er and
 o'er,
Pass off ; there shall succeed a faithful
 peace ;
Beautiful friendship tried by sun and
 wind,
Durable from the daily dust of life.
And though with sadder, still with kinder
 eyes,

We shall behold all frailties, we shall
haste

To pardon, and with mellowing minds
to bless.

Then though we must grow old, we shall
grow old

Together, and he shall not greatly miss
My bloom faded, and waning light of
eyes,

Too deeply gazed in ever to seem dim ;
Nor shall we murmur at, nor much
regret

The years that gently bend us to the
ground,
And gradually incline our face ; that
we
Leisurely stooping, and with each slow
step,
May curiously inspect our lasting home.
But we shall sit with luminous holy
smiles,
Endeared by many griefs, by many a
jest,
And custom sweet of living side by side ;

And full of memories not unkindly
glance

Upon each other. Last, we shall de-
scend

Into the natural ground—not without
tears—

One must go first, ah god ! one must go
first ;

After so long one blow for both were
good ;

Still like old friends, glad to have met,
and leave

Behind a wholesome memory on the
earth.

And thou, beautiful god, in that far
time,

When in thy setting sweet thou gazest
down

On this grey head, wilt thou remember
then

That once I pleased thee, that I once
was young ? ”

When she had spoken, Idas with one
cry



"HE LOOKING DOWNWARD, AND SHE GAZING UP."

Held her, and there was silence ; while
the god
In anger disappeared. Then slowly they,
He looking downward, and she gazing
up,
Into the evening green wandered away.

